

Things I Wish I Had Known When I Was a Beginning Turner

Jim Echter

Every advanced woodturner was once a beginner. Some of us were lucky enough to enjoy lessons or had access to books and DVDs on woodturning topics. For many turners, however, woodturning is a self-taught endeavor. Based on my thirty years as a woodturner, I offer a list of tips and suggestions that I wish I had known when first starting to turn wood.

- **Good lighting is key to producing good work.** Purchase quality task lights and utilize full-spectrum (sunlight) fluorescent bulbs in overhead lighting. Sunlight bulbs help to distinguish colors and the surface condition of turned wood better.
- **Dust is your enemy.** It is simply bad for your health. Invest in a good dust collector and dust mask. *Wear your dust mask.*
- **Sharp tools are a must.** Purchase a grinding system to quickly touch up and sharpen tools. Keep your tools sharp; you have to sharpen them more often than you think is necessary. Some woods have high silica content and will dull tools in seconds. Clean cuts on wood will not happen with dull tools. Using dull tools results in more sanding. Purchase an 8" (20cm) -diameter, slow-speed grinder and a good-quality wheel, appropriate for use with turning tools. A fine oilstone and a 600-grit diamond slip are important for honing. ▶



Jim Echter turns a bowl in his shop.

CA glue is a woodturner's duct tape. Use it for repairing cracks, attaching HSS tool bits to handles, and gluing wet (or dry) turning blanks to waste blocks.



- **Learn to hone.** You don't have to hone all your woodturning tools, but some, like the skew, just work better when honed. Honing, once learned, is usually quicker than sharpening and removes less of that expensive tool steel. Many excellent DVDs are available on sharpening and honing—get one!
- **Cut sheets of abrasive paper into small pieces, use them once or twice and throw them out.** This provides 100% utilization of each full sheet. Also, using fresh sandpaper gives a better surface finish.
- **Cyanoacrylate (CA) glue is a woodturner's duct tape.** It can be used for gluing wet or dry turning blanks to waste blocks, repairing cracks, attaching HSS tool bits into handles, and for gluing a minor cut closed to stop the bleeding. Purchase quality

glue, spray and aerosol accelerators, and a bottle of debonder. CA doesn't stick to wax paper, so having a roll of it to cover workbenches is a good idea. The fumes from CA, as it goes through its chemical reaction for curing, are extremely dangerous. Use an exhaust fan so that you do not inhale them.

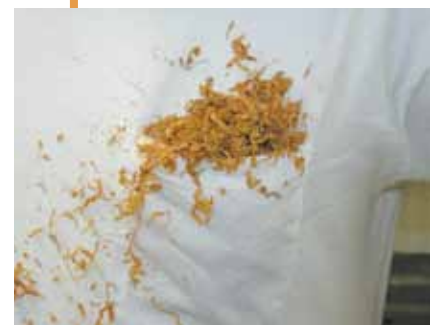
- **Smooth your toolrests and soften the sharp edges from new turning tools.** If a toolrest is rusted, pitted, scratched, and/or nicked, tools cannot slide effortlessly across it. File the surface smooth, run some 600-grit sandpaper across it, and wax it. Remove the sharp corners and edges on turning chisels so they don't mess up the toolrests.
- **Remember your ABCs.** You must *anchor* the tool to the toolrest and rub the *bevel* before you start your *cut*, especially in spindle turning.
- **The pressure on the tool is down toward the floor and onto the toolrest.** Directing pressure the right way lets the wood come to the tool edge without pushing the tool into the work. Beginners tend to push the tool into the wood instead of holding the tool to the toolrest.
- **Turn small bowls first.** Many instructional DVDs play tricks with viewers' eyes: Bowls appear much larger when in reality they are often no larger than 6" (15cm)

in diameter. Make a dozen little bowls to learn the basics before attempting something big.

- **It is okay to adjust the toolrest, but turn the lathe off first.** The toolrest provides the mechanical leverage needed for tool control. An expert turner will tweak the height of the toolrest as little as $\frac{1}{16}$ " (2mm) to provide better cuts. If you switch from a $\frac{5}{8}$ " (16mm) to a $\frac{3}{8}$ " (10mm) bowl gouge, adjust the height of the toolrest.
- **Round over the tips of calipers.** Calipers can be purchased inexpensively at garage sales and flea markets; however, they usually have been used for metal working so they have pointed or square tips. These tips will catch on the wood and cause the caliper to be thrown across the shop.



Use a file to smooth the nicks out of your toolrest. Sand the surface lightly and apply wax. Do this routinely and your turning will improve.



Why not tape your pocket closed?



Taping your pocket closed prevents it from filling up with shavings. This is true for pant pockets, too.

If your lathe is too short, raise its height using sturdy riser blocks. Buy a large dustpan and invest in a good-quality antifatigue mat.



- **Don't invest in fancy, high-end, cryogenically cooled, powder-metal chisels.** They will not make you a better turner. Purchase HSS chisels at first. Use these tools to practice sharpening—why learn with expensive tools?
- **Join your local chapter of the AAW.** There are more than 350 chapters in the AAW, and many clubs hold sessions for beginners.
- **Take private lessons.** Two hours with an instructor will save you weeks of frustration. Or, spend a week at one of the many woodturning schools. Woodturning is fun! The sooner you learn the basics, the sooner the fun starts.

Round over the tips of calipers to avoid catches when measuring wood while it is spinning on the lathe.



Cut sheets of abrasive paper into small pieces or strips. Use them once or twice and throw them away.

- **Learn to turn a spindle first.** I realize that beginners want to turn bowls; however, once you learn how to turn spindles, you will better understand how wood likes to be cut and will master tool usage and control. Mastering spindle turning makes transitioning to turning bowls much easier. A spindle turner can learn to turn bowls much quicker than a bowl turner can learn how to turn spindles.
- **Family and friends only need so many bowls.** Spindle turning provides many more opportunities to create useful items.
- **Find some FOG (found-on-ground) wood.** Small-diameter FOG branches are ideal for learning spindle turning. Be on the lookout for freshly trimmed trees. Green wood is a joy to practice with because it is less expensive and easy to cut.

Wear safety gear: respirator, ear protection, and eye protection. When turning large items, a faceshield is recommended. Wear a dust mask whenever you are in your shop and make use of a dust collector as well.



- **Many woods are toxic.** Learn about wood toxicity and listen to your body. If you start to itch, wheeze, or your heart starts to race, stop turning that piece of rosewood, cedar, or cocobolo. Read about wood toxicity on the AAW website (woodturner.org).
- **Buy several pair of reader safety glasses.** My last pair cost \$8 and I love them.
- **There really is something called the Dance of the Woodturner.** Move your body and your feet in order to effectively move your tools on the toolrest.
- **Tape your pockets closed using blue painter's tape.** It is easier than trying to remove all the chips and sawdust from inside a pocket. ▶



Turn a lot of small bowls before progressing to larger ones. The AAW has many DVDs available on turning techniques, as well as project books for beginners.

- **The tannins in many woods, such as oak, react with the acids and oils in hands to turn them black.** Wash with a little lemon juice. The black will disappear.
- **Buy a big dustpan.** A big dustpan makes cleanup go faster.
- **Raise or lower the height of your lathe to achieve the correct height.** If the height is too low, your back will suffer. Here's how to measure for the correct height: Stand straight up and bend your arm so it is 90° to the floor. Measure the distance from the floor

to your elbow. This is the minimum height the lathe spindle needs to be from the floor. For bowl turners, it can be 1"-2" (25mm-50mm) higher. Add risers to the lathe or build a riser to stand on to achieve the correct height. While you are at it, purchase antifatigue mats to stand on.

- **Take the time to warm up.** Begin by making a few practice cuts in scrap wood, especially if turning is a hobby and you took the summer off to play golf.
- **Stretch.** Many turners get into the "turning zone" when they are working, hovering over the

lathe for long periods of time. Stop often, step away from the lathe, and stretch. Reach for the ceiling, bend over and touch the floor, twist at the waist, and/or hang from the ceiling to relax tense muscles.

- **Don't forget ear protection.** With lathes spinning, power sanders and dust collectors running, and air compressors kicking on, hearing protection is a must.
- **Listen for chainsaws in your neighborhood.** That sound means someone is trimming or removing a tree. Often it is an ornamental tree, which can yield unusual wood. Introduce yourself and ask for a couple of cutoffs. Remember to make something for the person as a thank-you.
- **The lathe is the inexpensive part of woodturning; accessories are expensive.** When the cost of chisels, chucks, calipers, a bandsaw, lighting, dust collectors, sharpening systems, air compressors, sanding systems, and finishes are factored in, the investment is significant. Select the spindle size of your first lathe so that chucks can be used on future lathes.

Join your local AAW chapter. Many members are willing to help beginners learn how to turn.



Woodturning is fun and addictive when you master the basics. I hope these tips help beginners avoid a few pitfalls. To add your tips to this list, email me! I will update the list on the AAW website to share with others. ■

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The author demonstrates for a woodturning club.